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THE
BIBLE STUDY DEPARTMENT
OF A
COLLEGE CHRISTIAN UNION

[B.C.C.U. Series—No. 9.]

THE
BIBLE STUDY DEPARTMENT
OF A
COLLEGE CHRISTIAN UNION

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The Bible Study Department

OF A

College Christian Union.

THE main purpose of the Bible Study Department is to train the members of the Christian Union in the habit of private Bible study. The great importance of this in relation to the spiritual life of each Christian student is clearly shown in Mr. Mott's pamphlet, "Bible study for Personal Spiritual Growth," a pamphlet which deserves a wide circulation.¹ But the importance of Bible study cannot be limited to the individual. That which nourishes, strengthens, and develops each Christian life in a Union must be of fundamental importance to that Union as a whole. In this connection Mr. Mott writes: "It may be asserted as a settled principle that Bible study is the pivotal department of the Christian Association. Those who have widely visited and studied these Associations are agreed that in proportion to the emphasis laid upon Bible study are the life and fruitfulness of other departments of the work. Are your Association meetings uninteresting, formal, and lifeless? Do your members lack the

¹ B.C.C.U. Series No. 5, price 1d.

desire to do personal work, or the knowledge of how to do it, or, to press the matter still closer, the power with which to do it? Do the members give grudgingly of their time and money for the prosecution of the Association enterprises? Are some of the professing Christians leading inconsistent lives? Is the missionary spirit wanting? Do comparatively few of the members consecrate their lives to distinctively religious callings? Is the prayer life of the Association fitful and feeble? If any or all of these things are true, it may be traced to insufficient devotional and practical Bible study."

But further, the student who has acquired the habit of Bible study will not forsake it when he leaves College to enter upon his life work. The importance of the Bible Study Department reaches out beyond the individual student, beyond the College Christian Union, to the universal Church of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us that the Scriptures furnish the man of God "completely unto every good work"; therefore every Christian enterprise will feel the strength and influence given to it by men to whom the study of these Scriptures has become a habit. Remembering this and also what important positions men of education hold in the different branches of the Church of Christ, we may well ask ourselves the question whether a Christian Union can do any greater or more enduring work than that of sending out into the world year by year men and women who have acquired while at College the habit of systematic Bible study.

ADVANTAGES OF ASSOCIATED BIBLE STUDY IN BIBLE CIRCLES.

The system of devotional Bible study in Bible Circles, which is being developed by the British College Christian Union, and which has now been adopted by a very large number of Christian Unions in this country, has been found by experience to be profitable and well adapted to the varying conditions of College life. The following advantages of this method of associated Bible study may be noted:—

(1) By means of it each generation of students may be able to enlist and train the next generation in habits of Bible study.

Even to many Christian students the Bible is an uninteresting book, because they have not learned to study it; and to urge such to undertake private Bible study is often difficult and ineffectual. It is easier, however, to invite them to a Bible Circle: and if by joining this they are brought under the influence of two or three eager Bible students, who have learned how to seek for the hidden treasures of God's Word, they may find the Bible become a new book to them.

(2) Bible Circles prove helpful to the private study of all the members.

Not a few have found the Circle to be, as it were, a goal of study and consequently a real help and stimulus in the formation of the habit of setting apart a regular time each day for the devotional study of God's Word.

Others, again, have only a child's conception of the Bible because they have never begun to study it in an intelligent and systematic fashion. The Bible Circle, by providing a definite subject for study, meets a difficulty which confronts some at the outset, that they do not know where to begin. The careful working out of a subject in a Bible Circle will indicate the lines along which the individual may work out other subjects for himself; system in Bible study is developed, and it is prevented from degenerating into the mere hurried reading of a chapter.

(3) In the third place, Bible Circles offer an opportunity for the interchange of knowledge and experience. In addition to the lessons which each member has gathered himself from the passage studied, he will gain new thoughts and ideas from others. He will be kept from getting into grooves in his study, to which the natural bent of his mind may incline him. He will acquire a broader conception of the teaching of the Bible, and a deeper insight into its meaning.

(4) The Bible Circle affords an opportunity for Christian fellowship. By such contact the members are able to stimulate one another. Moreover by joining such a Circle a student puts himself under an influence which may be a safeguard to his spiritual life; it will be less easy to drift away from Christ when there is the weekly encouragement of meeting with those who are seeking to follow Him.

These advantages are not theoretical merely, but have been proved by experience to be real.

There are many students who can bear witness that their College Bible Circle has been one of the most powerful helps in their spiritual life.

DEFINITION OF BIBLE CIRCLES.

A Bible Circle may be briefly defined as a small meeting for the devotional study of the Bible.

This definition excludes questions of criticism from the Bible Circle study. The critical study of the Bible is helpful and necessary; and it would be well, if the time can be found, for the Christian Union to afford students an opportunity for engaging in such study; but this should be kept distinct from the Bible Circle. The object of the Bible Circle is that students by dwelling on those words which are "spirit and are life," should be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Its aim is not so much the acquisition of knowledge as the attainment of holiness. In this connexion controversy and critical discussion are out of place. But so long as the main object is kept in view, it may be left to individual Circles to decide how far the introduction of questions of date, authorship, historical setting, etc., will promote or hinder this end.

The above definition also distinguishes the Bible Circle from two kinds of meetings not infrequently found in Colleges, viz. :—

(1) A meeting generally called the College Bible Reading. In this one of the members introduces the subject and occupies the greater

part of the time ; a short discussion follows, and the meeting closes. The weakness of this kind of meeting is that few of the members except the one who takes the meeting have previously studied the subject. Such meetings are generally uninteresting ; they must be so if the majority of members have nothing interesting to say. There is a tendency for members to come not to study but to hear an address ; and few students have time to prepare sufficiently to offer an exposition of real value.

(2) In order to improve the meetings the plan is sometimes adopted of asking clergymen or laymen from outside to come and take the meeting. This usually increases the interest and serves a good purpose ; but it fails to encourage the study of the Bible on the part of the students themselves. It will generally be found best to break this meeting up into Bible Circles ; not only will they prove more helpful to those who join, but the Christian Union will gain in strength and influence.

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF BIBLE CIRCLES.

(1) *The Holy Spirit must be recognised as Teacher.* Failure to appreciate this will soon undermine the spiritual force of the Circle. It is He who will carry the teaching into the deepest stratum of our being, and it is He who will write the message on the tables of our heart. Let His presence and help be sought and claimed at every meeting of the Circle.

(2) *Prayer should occupy a prominent place, both*

in the private study of each member and in the weekly meeting. Prayer reverent, but bold and fearless, prayer real and not formal, prayer definite, sincere, and prompted by the Spirit. Let the Circle be made a matter of daily prayer; let each man study in the spirit of prayer; let the meeting be begun, continued, and ended with prayer.

(3) *Every member of the Circle should agree to devote a fixed time daily to the study of the subject.* The time agreed upon should not be less than fifteen minutes, and the Circle will be all the more interesting if it can be made half an hour. The object of the Circle is to help private Bible study, and the hour of meeting will be wasted if the study has been lacking. Nothing but failure awaits the Bible Circle from which this feature is absent.

In order to secure this essential, seeing that few students are able to devote a great deal of time to Bible study, it is generally necessary that the members of a Bible Circle should agree to make the subject of the Circle their private devotional study for the time being. An objection is commonly made to this, that to do so is to fall into the error of studying the Bible for the sake of others, and neglecting the study for personal spiritual growth. But such an objection involves a misconception of the purpose of a Bible Circle. Members should not attend to teach, but to compare notes. The private devotional study is the end, and the Bible Circle meeting exists only as a means towards that end. If each member will

study morning by morning, not for the Bible Circle, but for his own spiritual growth, he will find when the meeting comes that he will have plenty to say himself, and will gain many helpful ideas and suggestions from the study of the other members.

(4) *Truths learnt must be put into practice.* This is a fundamental law of spiritual growth. "He that hath to him shall be given." Obedience in what we know is the condition of further knowledge; that Bible Circle will deepen in its power and influence, whose members exhibit in their dealings with their fellow-students the practice of the truth as it is in Jesus. Well might Ruskin say to the students of Oxford, "Read your Bibles, making it the first morning business of your life to understand some portion of it clearly, and your daily business to obey it in all that you understand."

The following special features of a Bible Circle should also be carefully noted. At first sight they may appear of slight importance; but experience has shown that to neglect them involves a weakening of the Circle:—

(1) *The Circle should be small and the attendance regular.* Five or six is, perhaps, the best number of members for a Bible Circle, and if the number exceeds eight the Circle should be broken up into two. In a too large Circle there is not time for all the members to take part, and a tendency towards reserve and lack of freedom is apt to prevail. In consequence of this the discussion may drift into the hands of two or three of the

more active members, so that the others feel less responsibility for preparation and regularity of attendance. Moreover, in a large Circle it is more difficult to arrange a place and time of meeting equally convenient to all the members ; and to agree upon a subject which all are desirous of studying.

As the Circle is intended for and will be interesting to only those who have previously studied the subject, a definite membership should be insisted on, and regularity of attendance should be a condition of this membership. Those who are irregular lose the unity of the study ; and lack of interest or sympathy on the part of some members tends to make the whole Bible Circle half-hearted. Some Circles make it a rule that a written excuse for absence must be sent, and that any member having twice failed to offer a satisfactory reason ceases to be a member of the Circle.

(2) *A Syllabus or Outline of the Study is almost indispensable.* Without this it is impossible to avoid vagueness and repetition. For example, in the study of the Teaching of Jesus about Prayer, there is a danger of a Bible Circle attempting to discuss all the teaching at each meeting ; whereas in the outline study prepared by the B.C.C.U. this subject is divided into nine distinct studies, each offering enough material for a week's meditation ; this secures comprehensiveness and thoroughness, and prevents overlapping and waste of time. Moreover an outline, if good, can hardly fail to suggest fresh lines of thought ; and its use will be in itself a training in the most fruitful methods of Bible study.

Some Bible Circles use a religious text-book as the basis of their study. The objection to this is that it does not leave sufficient scope for individual effort. For example, Rev. Andrew Murray's "With Christ in the School of Prayer," though extremely helpful for private reading, is not suitable for the purpose of a Bible Circle, as it is difficult to add anything to what it contains. The ideal outline is one which does not present conclusions, but suggests starting-points for inquiry.

A good outline is most difficult to prepare, and can be tested only by experience. The B.C.C.U. has been making a careful investigation of the outlines which have been successfully used in actual Bible Circles, and is publishing others on the lines which experience has shown to be best.¹ Bible Circles would greatly gain by making full use of the experience thus obtained, and by consulting the General Secretary as to the best outlines available.

(3) *All members should take an equal part in the meeting.* In Circles where a good outline is being used, it is as a rule not necessary to have someone specially appointed to open the subject. In particular cases, however, it may be well for the leader to ask one or more of the members to prepare with special care a certain portion of the subject, and to call upon them at the meeting to give the results of their study.

CONDUCT OF THE CIRCLE.

(1) *Frequency.*—If the members of the Circle are studying in private, they will find it desirable to

¹ In the Appendix will be found a list of suitable subjects for Bible Circles, arranged in a Four Years' Course.

meet as often as once a week to compare notes. If the Circle is small, and the place of meeting convenient to all, there should not be any difficulty in arranging this.

(2) *Place*.—A room in or near the College may be secured, if possible; but in many cases it may be more convenient to meet at the house or rooms of one of the members. For the purpose of taking notes, and in order to secure greater freedom, the members should gather round a table. This is of more importance than may at first sight appear.

(3) *Time*.—In general the most suitable length of time for the meeting is from forty-five to fifty minutes. In this case, if the place of meeting is convenient, members need not be absent from their studies for more than an hour altogether. If, however, students can without hurry devote a full hour to the meeting, their profit will be so much the greater. At least ten or fifteen minutes should be devoted to prayer. The meeting should begin and close with prayer, and it may sometimes be found helpful to have a short season of prayer during the course of the study.

(4) *Punctuality*.—It is of the utmost importance that the Circle should begin and close punctually, so that the members may be able to count on getting away at a specified time. It should be pointed out to members that by coming late they are wasting the time of others.

(5) *Record of results*.—If the study is carried on thoroughly, the members will learn much that will be of permanent value. If this is not retained in

some way so that it can be referred to in the future, the loss will be great. By joining a Bible Circle and recording results, a student may have at the end of his College course a series of valuable notes, the result of genuine study, on several of the books of the Bible, and on such important subjects as Prayer, the Holy Spirit, etc.

Notes should be taken, not on loose pieces of paper, which are easily lost, but in a good serviceable note-book ; or (what in the opinion of some is even better) on index cards. These cards not only offer the numerous advantages of portability, ready reference, etc., but also make it especially easy for the student to note his own results during his private study, and to supplement them on additional cards at the Bible Circle ; thus saving the trouble of copying out and rearrangement.¹

(6) Commentaries and books of reference may be consulted freely, but it is better that they should not be used during the time of daily devotional study. Many Colleges are so situated that it is not easy for students to obtain frequent access to theological books. In these circumstances the Bible Study Department of the Christian Union might with great advantage form a small library, containing at least one good commentary on the Bible, and also a few standard works relating to each course of study which is undertaken.

¹ A small card outfit, consisting of cardboard box, A-Z guides, and 200 cards, may be obtained from the Library Bureau Co., 10, Bloomsbury St., London, E.C. ; price 2s. 4d., by post 2s. 8d. Catalogues post free. Further information about the system may be obtained from the Gen. Sec., B.C.C.U. Office.

THE LEADER.

Very much depends on the leader. Not all good Bible students will make good leaders ; and when someone has been found who has the special gifts of leadership, it is well to make use of him. Towards the close of the session the leader for the ensuing year should be appointed, and given opportunity of conducting the Circle under the supervision of the retiring leader.

The following are some of the qualifications of a leader :—

(1) He should be a thorough believer in the Bible Circle system, and have mastered its literature and principles.

(2) He should try to devote more time to the study than may be possible for the other members ; but he should carefully refrain from occupying most of the time at the meeting. His work is to guide the discussion rather than to contribute to it.

(3) He should study the character of the members of the Circle, and try to make the study as helpful as possible to each, and to get the full benefit of their special habits of thought.

(4) He should see that members are regular in their study and in their attendance at the meetings, and should insist on punctuality. He may have to meet excuses from members that they have not time to prepare, etc. ; he should give thought as to the best way of meeting these. He should make sure that all members thoroughly understand the purpose of a Bible Circle, and should

endeavour to maintain the interest of the members at a high level.

(5) He should plan carefully beforehand how to make the best use of the time during the meeting, and try to keep the conversation from getting irrelevant and unprofitable. In leading the meeting tact and discrimination are required, and this demands prayerful forethought.

(6) He should look on the leadership of the Circle as a special work given him by God, giving it a special place in his prayers, and should be constantly planning how to make the meeting more interesting and helpful to the members of the Circle.

(7) In Colleges where there is no Central Secretary for Bible Circles, he should report to the B.C.C.U. Office (see p. 18).

HOW TO START A CIRCLE.

(1) Read this pamphlet several times till the principles of a Bible Circle have been thoroughly grasped. Also read the other literature referred to in it.

(2) Form a nucleus of two or three who will work and pray for the meeting. The pamphlet, "Bible Study for Personal Spiritual Growth" (B.C.C.U. Series, No. 5), will be found a good means of interesting students.

(3) Jot down the names of those likely to join, and approach them on the matter; be sure that they count the cost before deciding.

(4) Consult the B.C.C.U. Travelling Secretary if possible, or write to the General Secretary for advice about a good subject and outline.

(5) Let one of the general meetings at the beginning of the College year be devoted to the enrolment of members. This meeting is of great importance, and, if properly conducted, must be fruitful in results. It may be well to have two addresses, one on the importance of Bible study, given by an earnest and experienced Bible student; and the other on the advantages of Bible Circles as a help to Bible study, given by someone who is in thorough sympathy with the Bible Circle system, and is acquainted with its principles. At the close of the meeting slips of paper may be handed round, on which all who wish to enrol themselves as members of Bible Circles may write their names. Those who do this should be spoken to personally as soon after the meeting as possible.

(6) Be ready when the Circle grows to break it up into smaller ones. Aim at making the first Circle multiply itself indefinitely.

It should not be forgotten that success cannot be attained by attention to the foregoing suggestions. The one secret of success is an earnest desire on the part of the members to feed on the Words of Life. The Bible is not a book, it is an index to a Person. Where the motive force of love for Him of Whom the Book speaks is lacking, the most perfect organisation will fail to make the Circle a success; just as certainly as the most perfectly built engine is useless without the fire and steam.

RELATION TO OTHER BIBLE CIRCLES.

In no department of the work of a College Christian Union is the experience of different

Colleges so likely to be helpful to others as in the matter of Bible Circles. There is no reason why every Circle should not avail itself of all the experience of the best Circles, and the best experience of all Circles. It has been possible to prepare this chapter only because the experience of a large number of Circles for the past two years has been gathered and compared. Further investigation and comparison must result in improved methods; and the B.C.C.U. will be able, in the course of time, to prepare a series of outlines which have been tested by experience, and brought to a high degree of excellence. In order to secure this result every Circle must contribute its share of experience, and should, therefore, forward at the close of the College year, or preferably at the close of each course of study, a report of its work to the B.C.C.U. Office. These reports should contain information on the following questions :—

- (1) What has been the method of conducting the Circle ?
- (2) Have any points been found specially helpful ?
- (3) Have any points been found unsatisfactory ?
- (4) What outline was adopted ?
- (5) Was it found satisfactory ?
- (6) If divided into separate studies, which were found most helpful ?
- (7) Are there any points in which the outline might be improved ?

In Colleges where there are several Bible Circles, a *Central Secretary for Bible Circles* should be appointed. This will secure **permanence**, will

keep the different Circles in touch with one another, and will enable them to profit by the experience of the others. Unity and effective supervision will be introduced into the Bible Study Department, and the Union will be assisted in the work of enlisting all its members in Bible Circles. If the number of Circles is large, it may be well to appoint a small sub-committee to assist the Central Secretary in his work. It would be a good thing for this committee to arrange, at least once during each session, for a united meeting of all the Bible Circles for the purpose of recruiting new members, and of emphasising the importance of devotional Bible study.

The duties of the Central Bible Circle Secretary would be :—

- (1) To make himself master as far as possible of the best methods of conducting Bible Circles, and of the best outlines published ; and to be able to advise the leaders of the various Circles.

- (2) To allocate the members of the Christian Union in the most suitable Circles ; transferring members, when advisable, in order to strengthen weak Circles ; and trying to secure that all the Circles have good leaders.

- (3) To promote by every means in his power the habit of Bible study among the members of the Christian Union.

- (4) To receive reports from the leaders of the Circles, and keep a careful record of the working of each Circle ; and to send to the B.C.C.U. office a report of the Bible Study work carried on in his College as suggested on p. 18.

OTHER METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY.

In some cases the Bible Study Department may be able to introduce methods of Bible Study which deal more particularly with questions which are of necessity excluded from the Bible Circle system. For example, it has already been pointed out that criticism and controversial questions cannot have a prominent place in Bible Circles. Yet these are by no means unimportant, and a course of lectures by a sympathetic and competent professor on subjects relating to the historical and literary aspects of the Bible might prove helpful, if it could be arranged without encroaching on the time given by the students to the devotional study of God's Word,

In other cases it might be possible to form "Personal Workers' Classes," as has already been done in a large number of American Colleges. The object of these classes is "to enable Christian students, by special Bible studies, and by actual participation in personal work, to lead others one by one to Christ." This most important work needs tact and patience in a special degree. The members of these classes not only gain knowledge from the experience and study of others, but also find encouragement to persevere, in the sympathy and fellowship of their co-workers.

Both these methods of Bible study are described in the pamphlet entitled "The Bible Study Department of the College Association"; and the latter is more fully described in the pamphlet, "Personal Work; How Organised and Accomplished." These

pamphlets reflect the experience of hundreds of American Colleges, and contain many helpful suggestions. Every Secretary should give them most careful attention.¹

THE AIM OF THE BIBLE STUDY DEPARTMENT.

There is abundant need for reformation, abundant room for growth in the Bible Study Department of our Christian Unions. Bible study is as yet in its infancy in our Colleges. Amidst a multitude of Bibles there are few who study them, and fewer still who love that study. Patience and perseverance are needed. But, relying on the omnipotent Spirit of God, let each Bible Study Department place before its members this aim: to make actual for themselves, and through them for the Christian Church, what at present is little more than theory, viz. THE SUPREMACY OF THE WORD AS LIGHT AND LIFE.

¹ These pamphlets are published in the American College Series, but may be obtained at the B.C.C.U. Office.

APPENDIX.

FOUR YEARS' CYCLE OF SUBJECTS FOR BIBLE CIRCLES.

THIS Cycle has been drawn up to supply a comprehensive and varied scheme of devotional Bible-study for the use of College Bible Circles. It includes, as far as possible, only subjects specially suited for study in such Circles. An alternative subject is always given ; but the first-mentioned will generally be found the best. It is intended, if practicable, to issue a series of outlines for study on the various subjects in the Cycle in the order indicated. The course is so arranged that it may be entered upon at any point.

FIRST YEAR.

1. (a) Prayer—The Teaching and Example of Jesus Christ ; *or*,
(b) Prayer—The Teaching and Example of St. Paul.
2. (a) The Epistle to the Colossians ; *or*,
(b) The Epistle to the Ephesians—Teaching on (1) God the Father ; (2) The Lord Jesus Christ ; (3) The Holy Spirit ; (4) The Writer's Relation to God ; (5) Man's Relation to Man ; (6) Redemption ; (7) Sanctification.

3. (a) The Life, Times, and Teaching of Jeremiah ; *or*,
(b) Studies in the Minor Prophets.

SECOND YEAR.

1. (a) St. John's Gospel :—Its Witness to Jesus Christ ; *or*,
(b) The Teaching of Jesus Christ on (1) God ;
(2) Himself ; (3) The Holy Spirit ;
(4) Man ; (5) Sin ; (6) Salvation ;
(7) His own Death ; (8) His Coming again.
2. (a) The Epistle to the Hebrews ; *or*,
(b) The Jewish Sacrifices and Priesthood.
3. (a) The Life and Labours of St. Paul ; *or*,
(b) The Apostolic Church and Foreign Missions.

THIRD YEAR.

1. (a) The Character of Jesus ; *or*,
(b) Jesus Christ's Dealings with Individuals.
2. (a) The Holy Spirit ; *or*,
(b) The First Epistle of St. John.
3. (a) Progressive Revelation in the Old Testament : (1) The Idea of God ;
(2) Morality ; (3) The Hope of a Future Life ; *or*,
(b) Study of Selected Psalms.

FOURTH YEAR.

1. (a) The Teaching of Jesus Christ as to Christian Conduct : *e.g.* Humility, Self-denial, Social Relations, Forgiveness, Use of Wealth, the Sabbath, &c. ; *or*,

- (b) The Teaching of Jesus Christ about the Kingdom of God.
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